

11/28/22 Monday

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Buffalo Grocery Gunman Pleads Guilty to Murder, Terrorism Charges in Shooting of 10 Black Shoppers

By - Fantine Gardinier

A man who is accused of killing 10 Black shoppers and workers at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, earlier this year has pleaded guilty to charges that include murder and terrorism. At a Buffalo courthouse on Monday afternoon, 19-year-old Payton Gendron entered a guilty plea [for all 25 charges](#) a grand jury indicted him on, including 10 counts of first-degree murder, 10 counts of second-degree murder as a hate crime, three counts of attempted murder, one gun charge, and one domestic terrorism charge, according to the Erie County District Attorney's Office.

He previously pleaded not guilty to [27 hate crime charges](#) in a separate federal indictment. During the Monday hearing, Gendron reportedly answered "yes" and "guilty" after the judge read the name of each victim and asked him whether he'd killed them because of their race.

"This critical step represents a condemnation of the racist ideology that fueled his horrific actions on May 14," Gendron's lawyer, Brian Parker, told reporters. "It is our hope that a final resolution of the state charges will help in some small way to keep the focus on the needs of the victims and the community."

The charges stem from a [shooting on May 14, 2022](#), at the Tops Market in Buffalo, New York, in which 10 Black shoppers were shot to death and three other people, two of them white, were wounded. Police arrested Gendron at the scene of the crime wearing military-style fatigues, a bulletproof vest, and carrying an AR-15-style rifle.

Gendron, who livestreamed the massacre on his Twitch account, traveled three hours from his home in Conklin, New York, to carry out the shooting - a location he chose because of its large Black population.

In documents he posted online prior to the shooting, Gendron explained his motivations, including a belief in "Great Replacement Theory," a white supremacist conspiracy theory that alleges a secret plot to replace white people in the US with people of color or Jews.

Written on his AR-15 rifle were numerous white supremacist [symbols and references](#), including the name of Norwegian mass-murderer Anders Breivik; John Earnest, who attacked a California synagogue in 2019; several racial slurs; and the ["Black Sun" symbol](#) used by the Nazis as well as neo-Nazi groups, including the Ukrainian Azov Battalion.

The attack reopened a nationwide discussion about mass shootings and gun control, long difficult topics in US politics, as the country has come to see hundreds of mass shootings per year.

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'Collapse is Coming': Experts Anticipate Sharp Decline in US Real Estate Prices
By - Fantine Gardinier

As home sales continue to decline in the United States, real estate experts are increasingly expressing fears that home prices, which have spiked sharply during the pandemic, are set to soon collapse.

"In one line: collapse in prices is coming," said Kieran Clancy, senior US economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, in a recent bulletin reported in US media.

His comments come after the National Association of Realtors (NAR) [reported that data](#) for October 2022 revealed the ninth straight month of decline for sales of existing homes in the United States. Compared to a year prior, there was a 28.4% decline in October and a 5.9% decline from September's numbers.

Pantheon projects that housing prices will fall roughly 20% from their peak of \$414,000 in June 2022, bottoming out at around \$331,200. The NAR noted that in October, the average home price for all housing types was \$379,100, which was still 6.6% higher than a year prior.

Pantheon chief economist Ian Shepherdson also predicted last week "a drop of 15-to-20% over the next year, in order to restore the pre-COVID price-to-income ratio."

"In short, housing is in free-fall. So far, most of the hit is in sales volumes, but prices are now falling too, and they have a long way to go," he added.

According to analysts, the Federal Reserve's efforts to fight [rampant inflation](#) by aggressively increasing interest rates has bled over into the housing market, sending mortgage rates to a 20-year high of 7%.

Fannie Mae, the US-government-backed federal mortgage organization, [reported earlier this month](#) that consumer confidence in housing had hit its lowest point since 2011, when it began tracking the metric, with just 16% of consumers saying they felt it was a good time to buy a home. In addition, applications for new mortgages are at their lowest point since 1997.

For many economists and industry experts, the writing has been on the wall for some time. Last month, Jeremy Siegel, a professor of finance at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, [told CNBC](#): "I think we're gonna have the second-biggest housing price decline since [the] post-WWII period over the next 12 months. That's a very, very significant factor for wealth [and] for equity in the housing market."

Chen Zhao, economics research lead at real estate brokerage firm Redfin, [said in a report](#) last month that "The housing market is going to get worse before it gets better."

"The US housing market is at another standstill, but the driving forces are completely different from those that triggered the standstill at the start of the pandemic," Zhao noted. "This time, demand is slumping due to surging mortgage rates, but prices are being propped up by inflation and a drop in the number of people putting their homes up for sale. Many Americans are staying put because they already relocated and scored a rock-bottom mortgage rate during the pandemic, so they have little incentive to move today."

"With inflation still rampant, the Federal Reserve will likely continue hiking interest rates. That means we may not see high mortgage rates - the primary killer of housing demand - decline until early to mid-2023," Zhao added.

The warnings come as more economists also predict a recession in the coming months, also triggered by rising interest rates. The International Monetary Fund [warned recently](#) after cutting its growth projections that for the US economy, "the worst is yet to come and, for many people, 2023 will feel like a recession."

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US Air Marshals: Chances of Stopping Hijackings Being 'Demolished' by Deployment to Mexico Border

By - Fantine Gardinier

Earlier this month, the Biden administration ordered members of the US Federal Air Marshals Service (FAMS), a federal law enforcement agency that provides security for commercial airliner flights, redeployed to the US-Mexico border.

Sonia Labosco, the executive director of the Air Marshal National Council, a legal support group for air marshals, [told Fox News](#) on Monday the council is "calling on the president and DHS Secretary [Alejandro] Mayorkas, to please stop this deployment of air marshals from the aircraft and reallocating them to the border."

Labosco told Fox the council wrote to US President Joe Biden over the weekend "because we had a level four and a level three incident. Level four means that they tried to breach the cockpit. Level three, we had two of those, which means there were life-threatening behaviors on one of those aircraft. An individual had a straight razor to a passenger's throat. So these are very serious incidents."

"We have been decimated. We have been depleted. We're on less than 1% of flights," she told Fox. "These ground-based duties that they're pulling us out of the sky to go to the border are just demolishing our chances at stopping another 9/11."

News of the redeployment broke in late October after a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) memorandum leaked to the press told FAMS officers that "a surge in irregular migration" necessitated their going to the border to buttress the ranks of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and "protect the life and safety of federal personnel."

For at least some time, the deployments were voluntary, but earlier this month, the federal government-focused news outlet [Government Executive](#) reported it had obtained an email to FAMS staff, Tirrell Stevenson, the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) executive assistant administrator and the director of FAMS. It alerted employees that the agency had not received enough volunteers, so it may become "operationally necessary to assign" air marshals to the border. Stevenson said the rotations would last three weeks.

"I recognize the hardships these deployments can have on personal matters, and have directed Law Enforcement/FAMS supervisors, managers and leadership to take into consideration a range of factors when scheduling individuals for these deployments," he wrote.

When Mayorkas appeared before a House committee on November 15, US Rep. Jeff Van Drew (R-NJ) [grilled him about](#) the redeployments, saying “instead of having just one problem, now we have a few problems thanks to what we are doing to the air marshals.”

Mayorkas told Van Drew his concerns were legitimate, and that the DHS had requested funding to hire another 300 CBP agents in fiscal year 2023.

This is not the first time the air marshals have been used in this way. In May 2019, the DHS sent [“a few hundred volunteers”](#) to the US-Mexico border to assist CBP with various tasks related to the large numbers of migrants at the border, including distributing meals and providing legal support.

The size of FAMS is not publicly known, but is believed to include some 3,000 air marshals. It is also not known how many have been sent to the border. It was formed in the 1960s to provide security service for certain high-risk flights, with “sky marshals” training with a variety of federal services, including Border Patrol.

While only a few dozen positions existed in the small corps, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which were carried out by terrorists who hijacked four commercial airliners, their numbers rapidly expanded, and when DHS and TSA were formed, FAMS fell under their aegis.

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Watch: Giant Awakens as Hawaii's Mauna Loa Volcano Erupts for First Time in Nearly 40 Years
By - Fantine Gardinier

Mauna Loa, the world's largest active volcano, began to erupt on Sunday for the first time since 1984, scientists monitoring the volcano said.

According to scientists at the US Geological Survey's Hawaiian Volcano Observatory in Hilo, the eruption began just before midnight on Sunday. Webcams mounted on the summit caldera of Mokuaweoweo showed a vast fissure had opened in the crater, from which fountains of lava were pouring forth.

Later, lava and noxious sulfur dioxide gas began pouring out of vents along the volcano's northeastern slope and flowing in rivers down the mountain's gentle slopes.

While authorities on the Big Island have said the lava poses no danger to communities at present, they have issued warnings for ashfall and Pele's hair, a type of fibrous glass formed when lava is stretched thinly as it cools. Roughly 200,000 people live on the Big Island.

A shield-type volcano, Mauna Loa doesn't explode like Italy's Mount Etna or the Philippines' Mount Pinatubo; instead, its low-silica lava oozes out in effusive eruptions that build a broad mountain. That process is responsible for raising the Hawaiian archipelago above the Pacific seafloor.

Last month, authorities on Hawaii's Big Island advised residents to [prepare a “go bag”](#) in case they needed to evacuate quickly, since there were increasing signs that Mauna Loa would soon erupt. It hasn't erupted since 1984 and previous eruptions haven't posed much of a threat to

human settlement, but the largest city, Hilo, is partly built on a lava flow from a 19th century eruption.

By comparison, Mauna Loa's smaller neighbor of Kilauea has persistently erupted for years at a time and posed a much greater danger to human settlement.

According to local news reports, more than 300 flights have been delayed because of the eruption.

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NASA Shares Stunning 'Earth Eclipse' Photo as Orion Sets Distance Record for Crew-Rated Spacecraft

By - Fantine Gardinier

The Artemis 1 mission set a new record on Monday for the furthest distance a spacecraft rated to carry human crew members has ever traveled from our planet. The record was set at the apex of a special long orbit of the moon as the Orion capsule tested out its capabilities.

The US space agency NASA said on Monday that Orion had reached a distance of 268,554 miles from Earth, or roughly 40,000 miles beyond the moon's orbit. As it neared the acme, Orion's camera snapped a never-before-seen image of the moon eclipsing the Earth - typically, we see the opposite here on Earth, as the moon eclipses the sun in a [solar eclipse](#) or the Earth eclipses the moon in a [lunar eclipse](#).

The photo recalls the famous "[pale blue dot](#)" photo snapped by Voyager 1 as it passed Neptune's distant orbit in February 1990, in which the Earth appears as little more than a bright star, indistinguishable from other cosmic specks of light.

A quarter of a million miles is by no means the furthest a human-built spacecraft has traveled. Numerous probes have visited every planet in the solar system, and the Voyager probes have left the solar system entirely and entered interstellar space. However, it is the furthest any spacecraft intended to carry humans has ever dared venture from our planet.

Orion doesn't have any humans on it yet, though - that's not expected to happen until the Artemis 2 mission in late 2024, if all goes according to plan. However, it does have three human-like mannequins on-board to test the stresses placed on the human body during the mission, and several scientific experiments. The Artemis 1 mission is intended to [test out the capabilities](#) of the Space Launch System rocket and the Orion capsule as they run through all their mission activities, including the dangerous reentry of Earth's atmosphere. It's expected to do so on December 11.

Humans haven't left low Earth orbit since December 1972, when the last Apollo spacecraft carried two astronauts to the moon and back. This time, however, we intend to stay on the lunar surface. The US and China, among other countries, have laid out plans to [begin constructing a permanent lunar base](#) in the next few years, intended to serve as a base of operations for exploring the moon as well as the rest of the solar system.

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Illinois to Likely Lose Bid for Early DNC Primary State as Michigan, Minnesota Become Frontrunners
By - Ian DeMartino

In 2020, Iowa voted on February 3, followed by New Hampshire on February 11, Nevada on February 22, and South Carolina on February 29. Super Tuesday was March 3, which saw 15 states vote, along with American Samoa and the Democrats Abroad primary.

Michigan and Minnesota are the frontrunners to win the bid as the first Midwest state to vote in the DNC primaries, whereas Illinois looks to likely lose its bid, multiple insiders told the [Chicago Sun-Times](#).

In April, the DNC Rules and Bylaws Committee passed a resolution, calling for a nomination calendar that reflects the diversity of the country, helps the Democrats win the White House, and contributes to a fair electoral process.

Illinois, as one of the most diverse states in the country, hoped that fact would help propel it to the front of the voting line. However, Illinois has two major faults going against it: the state is not a battleground state and the media market in Chicago is expensive, potentially putting less funded candidates at a disadvantage.

During Illinois' pitch to the DNC Rules and Bylaws Committee, its representatives were also questioned if local Chicago politics would overshadow the presidential primary, specifically pointing to Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot's recent battles with the Chicago Teachers Union. Conversely, Michigan and Minnesota are both battleground states where the DNC recently took control of the states' government. The thinking goes that the eventual nominee will get a boost in the first state to vote by starting their primary campaigns there.

US President Joe Biden, the presumed 2024 Democratic nominee, has not officially commented on how he would like the primary process to begin. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre did not provide any insight into the president's thinking when asked on Monday. "I don't have anything else to preview or to share about any comments or statements that the president may make on this particular issue," she said.

Iowa, which has long held the first-to-vote distinction in the DNC primaries is almost certain to lose that spot. It has been criticized for having an oversized effect on the primary while lacking diversity and being a GOP stronghold. Its caucus system has been called oblique and byzantine.

The rules and bylaws panel took pitches from 16 states and Puerto Rico in June.

The potential defeat of Illinois' bid to become the first state to vote will reportedly not affect the state's attempts to host the 2024 Democratic National Convention. New York, Georgia, and Texas are other contenders to host the event.

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Police Use Hack of Encrypted Messaging App to Bust 'Super-Cartel' in Europe, Dubai By - Ian DeMartino

Encrypted phone manufacturers have been the target of authorities recently, including Phantom Secure, SKY Global, and Encrochat.

Europol authorities [arrested 49 individuals](#) in a massive drug sting that resulted in the seizure of 30 metric tons, or more than 66,138 pounds of cocaine using a 2021 hack of encrypted phone service SKY Global.

Authorities have detailed that six "high-value" targets were arrested in Dubai, two of whom were nationals of the country. The remaining suspects were nationals of France, Spain and the Netherlands.

Elsewhere, 10 suspects were arrested in Belgium, six in France, and 13 in Spain. Another 14 individuals had been arrested in the Netherlands in 2021 as part of the same investigation. Authorities say the accused are a part of an international drug operation they described as a "super-cartel." They say the organization controlled roughly a third of the cocaine trade in Europe.

"The scale of cocaine importation into Europe under the suspects' control and command was massive and over 30 [metric tons] of drugs were seized by law enforcement over the course of the investigations," Europol said in a statement.

It is not clear if the 30 metric tons of cocaine seized includes the 17 metric tons that were seized in the Netherlands in 2021 or if this was an entirely new seizure of 30 metric tons.

One of the suspects arrested in Dubai was described as "an extremely big fish" by the AFP's Europol sources.

The operation's success hinged on authorities hacking SKY Global ECC, a secure end-to-end encryption messaging app that was used by the criminal organization. The organization trusted the app so much that police say they used it to send pictures of torture and the internal finances of the organization.

SKY Global was a company based in Canada that offered secure messaging for its users and modified phones to turn off their microphones, cameras, and GPS units. Authorities say they took over the SKY ECC server in 2021 and used that to infiltrate the criminal gangs.

SKY Global's CEO Jean-François Eap was indicted for conspiracy to violate the RICO act. The US Department of Justice says the company's services were "specifically designed to prevent law enforcement from actively monitoring the communications between members of transnational criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking and money laundering."

Eap has called the accusations false and said his company was being targeted for protecting users' "fundamental right to privacy." At the time of his indictment, the FBI said there were more than 70,000 SKY Global phones in use worldwide. Eap has sued the federal government for seizing its internet domains. Both cases are ongoing and Eap has not yet been extradited from Canada to the United States for his trial.

The arrests come just weeks after Spanish authorities arrested 13 people in three cities after 1,539 pounds of cocaine was found in a shipping container in Valencia.

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Ireland MEP Warns UK Could Cut Off Natural Gas Supply Amid Shortage This Winter

By - Ian DeMartino

The UK and most of Europe have been dealing with an energy crisis since Western nations put sanctions on Russia, limiting the importation of natural gas from the country.

The United Kingdom's energy regulator Ofgem has warned there is a "significant risk" of natural gas shortages this winter, leading to alarm in Ireland, which depends on imports from the UK for most of its natural gas needs.

Ireland imports roughly 70% of its gas through Scotland via the Moffat interconnector pipeline.

The remaining supplies come from Ireland's sole source of natural gas, the Corrib gas field, which is only capable of providing 30% of Ireland's energy needs. The percentage of supplies is expected to decrease over the next decade.

This dependence on the UK has led some in Ireland to push for importation from countries other than the UK.

"I mean, clearly we have to have some form of agreement with the UK government and with UK gas suppliers that in the event of there being a shortage that we would still be supplied gas," said Billy Kelleher, Fianna Fail Member of European Parliament for Ireland South. "And that clearly makes us very vulnerable."

The Irish coalition government opposes the importation of liquified natural gas (LNG) because much of it is obtained through hydraulic fracking, which is banned in much of Western Europe, including the UK, because of its environmental impact. However, that has not stopped many countries from importing natural gas from the US, where two-thirds of natural gas is produced through fracking. Ireland is an exception and does not import any natural gas from the United States.

Kelleher told [Sky News](#) that Ireland needs to improve its natural gas infrastructure and lessen the county's reliance on the UK.

"We do need an awful lot of work to be carried out in terms of gas storage and our ability to import gas by other means. Primarily LNG, so we are not dependent on gas companies from the UK and on the British government itself, who are finding it difficult to source enough gas for their own country."

However, it is highly unlikely the UK will cut off the Moffat pipeline, even if things get tight for the UK at home. The state-owned Gas Networks Ireland controls two pipelines that supply gas to Northern Ireland. If the UK tried to shut off the Republic of Ireland's supply of gas, that would likely result in a corresponding cut-off for Northern Ireland.

"Continuing supplies to Northern Ireland would require the cooperation of the Irish government, even if supplies to the Republic were cut off," John FitzGerald, a former member of the Northern Ireland Authority for Energy Regulation told SkyNews. "Thus I would anticipate a cooperative solution to any – unlikely – need to ration gas."

A more likely scenario is that the UK and the Republic of Ireland will suffer whatever fate the winter brings them together, including higher prices or temporary shut-offs.

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Amid Deal Disputes, Poll Finds Most Americans Agree Preventing Rail Strike 'Very Important'
By - Ian DeMartino

The last rail workers' strike was in 1992 and lasted for two days before Congress intervened. The last extended strike was in 1922, when 400,000 rail workers walked off the job for better wages and conditions. The 1922 strike lasted two months.

A poll commissioned by the Association of American Railroads (AAR) has revealed that the [vast majority of voters](#), 92%, believe that preventing a railroad strike is important, including 71% who said it is "very important."

More than 115,000 rail workers are threatening to strike if a deal cannot be negotiated by December 9. In September, the Biden administration arbitrated a tentative deal between the AAR and rail union leadership, temporarily halting a rail strike. However, four of the 12 major rail worker unions' rank-and-file members rejected the deal, leading to another stand-off.

At the heart of the dispute is the lack of paid personal leave for rail workers. While the tentative deal did provide more paid vacation time, it only included one day for paid personal or sick leave, up from zero under the previous collective bargaining agreement.

The AAR poll also found that 72% of voters believe Congress should step in if a deal is not reached in time and the same 72% felt that the tentative deal was fair when told it included an average of \$160,000 total compensation when counting benefits.

Congress has the power to step in and force rail workers to accept a deal because of a 1926 law designed to prevent rail shutdowns. Rail workers argue the piece of legislation has lessened their leverage since the AAR knows Congress is likely to force staffers back to work.

If Congress orders the workers back and they strike anyway, it would be considered an illegal strike and workers would not be guaranteed rights normally afforded to striking employees, including unemployment benefits.

The poll, which was conducted by the AAR, did not inform respondents that rail workers would only receive one day of sick or personal leave. It did include an "opposing side" argument but did not state how much personal leave workers would receive under the tentative agreement.

Rail Strike Effect on US Economy

It has been estimated that a rail strike would cost the economy \$2 billion a day. Over 40% of freight in the country is hauled by train. While some of that could be moved with trucks, there are not enough semi-trucks to make up the difference. The AAR estimates that 467,000 more trucks would be required to haul the materials currently carried by train.

The economic effects of a rail strike would be widespread. More than 30% of packaged food is carried by rail, and some raw ingredients such as grain and barley are almost entirely carried by rail. Livestock feed also depends on trains for its movement around the country, potentially putting entire herds at risk.

Additionally, commuter rails would be affected. Roughly half, and nearly all of Amtrak's long-distance routes, use freight rails and would have to cease operations during a strike. In

September, days before the strike was scheduled to begin before the tentative agreement, Amtrak halted all service to prevent stranding customers.

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Twitter Stops Enforcing COVID-19 Misleading Information Policy

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Twitter, which has recently been acquired by billionaire Elon Musk, is phasing out its policy designed to combat misleading information regarding COVID-19, according to a new notice.

In 2020, Twitter developed an extensive set of rules aimed at banning "harmful misinformation" about the coronavirus and vaccines.

"Effective November 23, 2022, Twitter is no longer enforcing the COVID-19 misleading information policy," the notice posted in the social network's rules section said.

According to statistics, between January 2020 and September 2022, Twitter suspended more than 11,000 accounts for violating pandemic coverage rules and removed almost 100,000 pieces of content that violated them.

After acquiring Twitter, Musk is revisiting the social network's editorial policy, softening censorship and granting amnesty to banned users.

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First Shipment of Russian Fertilizers Departs From Netherlands For Malawi - UN

UNITED NATIONS, November 29 (Sputnik) - The first shipment of Russian fertilizers blocked in Europe has departed from the Netherlands en route to Malawi, a spokesperson for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The first shipment of 20,000 MT of fertilizer left the Netherlands on a WFP-chartered vessel, MV Greenwich, starting today, destined for Malawi via Mozambique. It will be the first of a series of shipments of fertilizer destined for a number of other countries on the African continent in the coming months," the statement said.

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Nuland to Attend OSCE Ministerial Meeting in Poland This Week – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland will travel to Poland this week for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) Foreign Ministers' Meeting, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Nuland will travel to Lodz, Poland November 30 to December 1, where she will attend the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Foreign Ministers' Meeting," the press release said.

Nuland will discuss issues such as security, prosperity, human rights, and territorial integrity, particularly related to the conflict in Ukraine, the release added.

The senior diplomat will also meet with Polish officials to thank the country for its leadership as OSCE chair and underscore the US commitment to NATO's eastern flank, the State Department said.

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Some Senior US Officials Back Call for Multinational Armed Force to Haiti – Reports

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – Some senior White House officials are calling for dispatching a multinational armed force to Haiti following its prime minister's request last month for assistance to help manage extreme gang violence, The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing several current and former officials.

The officials believe around 2,500 military and police officers could be sufficient to secure Haiti's main arteries from the gangs dominating the country.

But while the White House worries that the social unrest and humanitarian crises in Haiti will lead to mass migration to the United States, it does not want to put American boots on the ground. It has also failed to convince other countries to lead the mission, according to the report.

Experts say that the risks of foreign intervention are high and unlikely to eradicate violence by gangs, who are used by the economic and political elite to stay in power, according to the newspaper.

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Blinken on China Protests: US Backs Right of People Everywhere to Peacefully Protest

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States supports the right of Chinese people to peacefully protest, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"When it comes to protests that we are seeing in China ... our position is the same everywhere, which is that we support the right of people everywhere to peacefully protest," he said at a press conference with Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu.

Blinken is on a visit to Romania to take part in the NATO Ministerial and hold separate meetings with the alliance's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

As of November 28, daily COVID-19 cases in China have been hitting record highs for several days in a row, with 40,347 cases registered in the past 24 hours.

Due to numerous local COVID-19 outbreaks and the deterioration of the epidemiological situation, Chinese authorities have introduced partial lockdowns in some areas, while also

forcing their residents to undergo PCR testing on a daily basis. The restrictive measures have been tightened in a number of China's major cities, including Beijing and Shanghai.

The new restrictions have led to protests across the country. Public anger erupted after a fire occurred in a residential building in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, killing 10 people on November 24. The tragedy sparked speculations that the deaths could have been avoided if the government had not imposed COVID-19 restrictions on the residential complex.

The regional authorities have launched an investigation into the deadly fire and vowed to bring those responsible to justice.

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Blinken Says NATO to Reinforce Presence From Black to Baltic Seas

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that NATO will reinforce its presence from the Black to the Baltic seas.

"We're going to reinforce our presence from the Black to the Baltic seas," Blinken said at a joint press conference with Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu.

Blinken is on a visit to Romania for the NATO foreign ministers' meeting. He is also expected to hold separate meetings with the alliance's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba during the visit.

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Lockheed Martin to Train 17,000 US Army Civilian Personnel on Cyber Threats - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin is going to train up to 17,000 US Army civilian personnel to deal with cyber threats, the Department of Defense announced in a news release.

"Lockheed Martin will support cyber readiness and training for up to 17,000 US Army civilian cyber personnel under an Other Transaction Agreement awarded by the Army," the release said on Monday.

Lockheed Martin's latest cyber program, Mission Readiness & Reporting (MR2), will help the US military to identify, cultivate, and train Army civilian employees, the release added.

The US defense contractor will lead a team consisting of Ultimate Knowledge Institute (UKI), Aries Security, and Amazon Web Services govCloud, the release added.

UKI and Aries will provide training options for the civilian cyber workforce and Lockheed Martin MR2 will perform the analysis and analytics to address workforce skills development, according to the release.

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Raytheon Wins Nearly \$400Mln Deal to Assemble More Sea Sparrow Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Raytheon has won an almost \$400 million modification contract to build more Sea Sparrow missile assemblies for the US Navy, the US Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon Company [of] Tucson, Arizona, is awarded a \$397,679,384 ... modification ... contract to exercise options for fiscal 2023 guided missile assemblies, shipping containers, and spare parts," the Defense Department said in a press release on Monday.

The award is in support of the fiscal 2021-2023 Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile Block 2 full-rate production requirements," the release said.

Almost half the work on the contract will be performed in Tucson in the US state of Arizona (46%) with the rest being done in other locations around the world including in Australia, Norway, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, Turkey and Denmark, the release said. The RIM-7 Sea Sparrow is a US ship-borne short-range anti-aircraft and anti-missile weapon system, primarily intended for defense against anti-ship missiles, the release added.

The system was originally developed in the early 1960s but it still remains an important part of a layered air defense system, providing a short/medium-range component especially useful against sea-skimming missiles, according to published reports, according to the release.

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Western Reaction to Russia's Anti-LGBT Bill 'Interference in Internal Affairs' - Envoy

(Updates with more details, background in paras 6-19)

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Russia considers the reaction by the collective West to its Decree on Traditional Values to be interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov said.

Stepanov was summoned to the Canadian Foreign Ministry earlier on Monday in connection with the embassy's lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT)-related tweets, which were posted in response to the statement released by a coalition of Western states on Russia's law banning the promotion of LGBT propaganda.

"I said that we perceive the statement on behalf of the Coalition for Equal Rights as interference in the internal affairs of Russia as well as an attempt to influence the independent legislative process in a sovereign state," Stepanov said on Monday.

Stepanov called the conversation "substantive" and emphasized that Russia and Canada have agreed to maintain diplomatic contact and channels of communication despite the deep divergence and the strong disagreements between them.

"We agreed not to agree yet, but to maintain diplomatic contact and channels of diplomatic communication because in times of crisis this is important despite deep differences and even chasms between our views on what is happening," Stepanov said.

The ambassador noted that he met with Deputy Foreign Minister Sandra McCardell, who expressed the Canadian government's concerns about the legislative initiatives in Russia to protect the younger generation from non-traditional propaganda, which Ottawa considers to be contrary to universal human rights.

"Secondly, [she invited me] to reaffirm their signature on the Equal Rights Coalition document, which was released late last week on behalf of Canada and a number of sympathetic countries where we have been criticized," Stepanov said. "And thirdly, to express disagreement and concern in connection with the publication on the embassy's media portals of the statement in defense of traditional values."

Stepanov said he provided a detailed answer and drew attention to the fact that the Canadian Embassy in Moscow reports to the foreign affairs ministry and the essence of Russia's laws concern the preservation of traditional values.

"I told her about our document, which was approved by the President on November 9. Once again I handed over the text in English and French to our Canadian colleagues, explained that the task of our legislation is to protect adults and children precisely from propaganda of non-traditional or criminally punishable deviations," he said. "I reminded them that Russia is the custodian and bearer of traditional values. Western governments, including Canada, must respect the views on life of the majority of the Russian population."

Stepanov said he emphasized during the conversation with McCardell that Russia does not interfere in Canada's affairs and expects the Canadian government not to interfere in Russia's. "In general, the countries should respect internal traditions, historical roots, values and not impose them on each other," he said. "We do not pursue such a goal in Canada and would like Canada to allow our society to develop according to its own laws and aspirations without external interference."

Stepanov noted that the Canadian Embassy in Moscow posted LGBT rainbow flags, which Russia considers a violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and a manifestation of disrespect for the customs and traditions of the host country.

"If they come to us with their uninvited so-called 'values' and try to make some kind of political statements, then they should not be surprised when we make statements," he said. "I advised our Canadian counterparts how to address this situation. We expect them to not interfere in our internal affairs, in our lives according to our customs, historical canons and values. And then, by doing so, they will not create an unnecessary burden and irritant in our bilateral relations from the so-called 'LGBT agenda.' That's all. Everything should take place on the principle of the sovereign equality of states."

The Russian ambassador said Moscow does not impose on Canada its customs and traditions but demands from Ottawa - also from the collective West - that they also do not impose their pseudo-values on Russia.

"Then we will live together. Everyone in their country will realize their life according to their preferences and principles," he said.

In addition, Stepanov said the situation in Ukraine was discussed during his meeting at the foreign affairs ministry.

"[Ukraine's President Volodymyr] Zelensky can order the armed forces of Ukraine to lay down their arms and, together with his cabinet, the government and the state apparatus of Ukraine, agree to undergo voluntary denazification and ensure the demilitarization of Ukraine," Stepanov said. "The conflict would be over in a few days. We understand this, but this logic remains incomprehensible to Canada, which arms and sponsors Ukraine and is one of its leading sponsors."

Last week, the State Duma - the lower house of the Russian parliament - passed a law banning the promotion of LGBT propaganda, pedophilia and gender reassignment in advertising, media, books, movies and audiovisual services. Violators face a fine of up to 10 million rubles (\$165,000). The legislation still needs to pass the Federation Council - the upper chamber of parliament - and be signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The State Duma also adopted a technical law to ensure the entry into effect of a ban on foreign agents to serve in the foreign affairs ministry, hold rallies, as well as impose a number of other restrictions. Amendments were also made by the State Duma to deprive individuals with acquired Russian citizenship for surrender or evasion of military service.

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China Issue to Sit at 'Top of the Agenda' of Biden-Macron Talks - US Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron are expected to focus on China during their meetings this week, a senior US official said during a background call.

"I think China will be on the very top of the agenda between the two leaders... so I'm sure that the two presidents are going to want to compare notes on [China]," the official said on Monday. "Europe has its own interests - our views on China are not identical but I think there is a strong view that we should be speaking from a common script in response to China."

The US, the official added, welcomes the partnership with France to ensure a free, open and secure Indo-Pacific, which will be very much top of mind for the two presidents.

Both leaders will also discuss matters concerning Ukraine, Iran, and economic issues, the official said.

Macron meets with Biden on Thursday a day after the French president meets Vice President Kamala Harris at NASA's headquarters in Washington to discuss bilateral cooperation in space.

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Colorado Company Wins Contract Expansion to Handle Services at Guantanamo Base - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - A company based in the US state of Colorado has won an extension of its contract to provide support services to the Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the Defense Department announced.

"Vectrus Systems Corporation [of] Colorado Springs, Colorado is awarded a \$48,888,974 ... modification ... contract for base operations support services at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba," the Defense Department said in a release on Monday.

The award brings the total cumulative value of the contract to \$96,754,647, the release said.

"The contract modification is for a 12-month bridge extension of base operations support services under the basic contract," the release added.

Work on the contract will be performed at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and will be completed in a year's time by November 2023, according to the release.

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Biden Calls on Congress to Adopt Agreement Between Rail Unions, Operators to Avert Strike (Updates with details in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden called on Congress to immediately adopt the tentative agreement between railroad worker unions and operators in order to avert a nationwide strike in December that could cripple the rail system in the United States.

"I am calling on Congress to pass legislation immediately to adopt the Tentative Agreement between railroad workers and operators - without any modifications or delay - to avert a potentially crippling national rail shutdown," Biden said on Monday.

The deal provides a 24% pay raise for rail workers in addition to improved health care benefits and the ability of operating craft workers to take unscheduled leave for medical needs, Biden said.

The Association of American Railroads (AAR), in response to Biden's call for congressional action, said time is limited to bring national bargaining on this matter to a conclusion before the strike deadline expires.

A nationwide rail strike could cost the US economy \$2 billion per day, and it may potentially begin as early as December 9, the AAR said.

"No one benefits from a rail work stoppage – not our customers, not rail employees and not the American economy," AAR President and CEO Ian Jefferies said in a press release. "Now is the appropriate time for Congress to pass legislation to implement the agreements already ratified by eight of the twelve [rail] unions. A clear pattern of ratified agreements has been established and Congressional action to prevent a work stoppage in this manner is appropriate."

These agreements between rail workers and operations will ultimately boost average employee compensation and benefits to more than \$160,000, Jefferies said.

The AAR noted that eight of the 12 labor unions plus a portion of one of the largest US rail unions, SMART-TD, have now fully agreed to contracts forged in part by the leadership of the Biden administration. These deals provide employees with a 24 percent wage increase over the

five-year period from 2020 to 2024 and preserve employees' healthcare coverage, the AAR added.

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US, EU Held Constructive Talks on Trade Concerns Over Inflation Reduction Act - Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States and European Union officials held several constructive talks this month to properly address the EU's trade concerns with the US legislation known as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), a senior US administration official said during a conference call.

"The task force has already met several times this month, and we expect these productive conversations to continue," the US official said on Monday during a call previewing French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to the White House this week. "I think it's been a very constructive set of conversations (via US-EU task force) that, you know, is ongoing, between us and our partners in the in the EU."

The United States is committed to helping its EU allies better understand the IRA, the US official said.

The European Union deems the act "discriminatory" toward goods imported into the United States. Macron called the US legislation unfriendly and non-compliant with the World Trade Organization's provisions. EU countries are concerned the legislation may divert investments from Europe and could possibly spark a trade war between the United States and its European partners, according to media reports.

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Senior Official Says US Working to Ensure European Energy Supply for Winter, Beyond

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will work with France and other European partners to ensure the continent has adequate energy supplies this winter and beyond, a senior Biden administration official said.

"We will continue to work with France and Europe to ensure sufficient [energy] supplies will be available not just for this winter, but beyond," the senior administration official said on Monday, ahead of a state visit by French President Emmanuel Macron to the White House later this week.

Russian energy supplies to Europe have dropped amid sanctions and other measures taken in response to the special military operation in Ukraine. The US has since attempted to increase its export of energy to the continent to avoid supply shortages this winter, when demand for heating increases.

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Ukraine Expected to Be 'Front And Center' of Biden-Macron Talks This Week - US Official

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron are expected during a meeting this week to focus their talks on Ukraine, a senior US administration official said during a background call.

"This visit is an opportunity for the two presidents to coordinate on the most urgent global issues," the US official said on Monday. "I would expect discussions about Ukraine will be front and center."

Both leaders will also discuss matters concerning China, Iran, and energy and economic cooperation, the US official said.

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BlockFi Sues Bankman-Fried Entity to Recover Collateral After Bankruptcy - Filing

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Cryptocurrency firm BlockFi is suing an entity tied to the head of fellow cryptocurrency player FTX, Sam Bankman-Fried, in an attempt to recover collateral the company says it is owed, according to a court document filed in the US Bankruptcy Court for the District of New Jersey.

BlockFi, which filed for bankruptcy earlier on Monday, filed a suit against Bankman-Fried's Emergent Fidelity Technologies demanding he give them an unspecified amount of collateral they claim belong to the company.

The suit seeks an order from the court directing Emergent to immediately transfer the collateral to a neutral party, and ultimately BlockFi, the filing said.

Earlier this month, Bankman-Fried's cryptocurrency business filed for bankruptcy after competitor Binance backed out of plans to acquire it.

Neither individual nor institutional investors are expected to get anything back from FTX's bankruptcy proceedings, Gary Korolev, CEO of financial services firm Sovereign Wealth Management, told Sputnik.

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The deal provides a 24% pay raise for rail workers in addition to improved health care benefits and the ability of operating craft workers to take unscheduled leave for medical needs, Biden said.

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Western Reaction to Russia's Anti-LGBT Bill 'Interference in Internal Affairs' - Envoy

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Russia considers the reaction by the collective West to its Decree on Traditional Values to be interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign country, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov said.

Stepanov was summoned to the Canadian Foreign Ministry earlier on Monday in connection with the embassy's lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT)-related tweets, which were posted in response to the statement released by a coalition of Western states on Russia's law banning the promotion of LGBT propaganda.

"I said that we perceive the statement on behalf of the Coalition for Equal Rights as an interference in the internal affairs of Russia, as well as an attempt to influence the independent legislative process in a sovereign state," Stepanov said on Monday.

Stepanov emphasized that despite the strong disagreements between Canada and Russia, the two countries have agreed to maintain diplomatic contact and channels of communication.

"We agreed not to agree yet, but to maintain diplomatic contact and channels of diplomatic communication because in times of crisis this is important despite deep differences and even chasms between our views on what is happening," Stepanov said.

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Biden Rejects Antisemitism, Holocaust Deniers - White House on Trump Meeting With Fuentes
WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden "totally rejects" racism, antisemitism and Holocaust deniers and will continue to do so in the future, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

"This president totally rejects bigotry, racism, antisemitism... and this is something that we are going to continue to deny, including Holocaust deniers, and let's not forget, when you say things like this, when you do not speak out against these types of poisonous and dangerous kinds of remarks or representation," Jean-Pierre said in a statement on Monday.

Jean-Pierre made the comment after being asked to comment on former President Donald Trump's alleged meeting with controversial political commentator Nick Fuentes. On Friday, Trump said that he met with Ye, the artist formerly known as Kanye West, accompanied by an unknown guest of his at his Mar-a-Lago home in Florida. Some media outlets reported that the unknown guest was Fuentes, while others reported that he was not present at the Mar-a-Lago dinner with Ye. Last month, Ye spoke with Trump to plan a dinner between the two amid accusations of anti-Semitism against both men. Ye has been criticized for claims that Jews hold disproportionate power in certain industries. Trump has been criticized for claiming the US Jewish community was not grateful enough for his support of Israel during his time in office.

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Harris, Macron to Meet at NASA to Highlight US-France Space Cooperation - White House

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and French President Emmanuel Macron will meet at NASA's headquarters in Washington to discuss bilateral cooperation in space, the White House said in a scheduling guidance. "The Vice President will meet with President Emmanuel Macron of France at NASA Headquarters to highlight space cooperation between the United States and France," the White House said on Monday. The meeting between Harris and Macron is scheduled for Wednesday, the White House said. On Thursday, Harris and the Second Gentleman will join Macron and his wife for an official arrival ceremony, the White House said. Harris and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will also host a state luncheon for the Macrons on Thursday, the White House added. Macron will meet during his visit President Joe Biden and discuss the continued partnership on shared global challenges and areas of bilateral interest, the White House said in September.

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Nuclear Energy "Critical" for Canada's Green Transition - Freeland
WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Despite concerns, nuclear energy will play an integral role in Canada's green energy transition, according to Canada's Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland on Monday. "I am convinced that nuclear energy has to be part of a green transition. The demand of the need for energy is so high and so strong that nuclear energy is and will be absolutely critical," said Freeland when asked by another minister about the role of nuclear energy in Canada's efforts towards a green transition.

Freeland appeared at the House of Commons in front of the Standing Committee on Finance to discuss the Fall Economic Statement. Recently, Freeland has been publicly vocal about addressing labor shortages and supporting the green energy transition, for which she maintains nuclear energy will be critical.

Freeland provided that "strict regulations and inspections" would be necessary, but stressed that Canada has the natural resources and technology necessary for nuclear energy, and that it could prove integral in meeting Canada's rising energy needs.

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Financial Markets Underestimating Odds of Rates Continuing to Rise in 2023 - Fed's Bullard

NEW YORK, November 29 (Sputnik) - Financial markets are underestimating the odds of policymakers being more aggressive in fighting inflation next year, influential Federal Reserve banker James Bullard said, adding that rates will have to continue rising for the central bank to achieve its benign target for inflation.

"There is still a heavy degree" of expectations that inflation will go away naturally, Bullard, who's president of the St. Louis, Missouri division of the Fed, said in a live-streamed interview with the MarketWatch and Barron's services on Monday. "We need to keep rates at a sufficiently restrictive level for a longer period of time to ensure that inflation returns to our target."

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, expanded by 7.7% during the year to October, growing at its slowest pace in nine months after peaking at 9.1% during the 12 months to June.

The drop came after relentless interest rate hikes by the Fed, which has added 375 basis points to rates since March. Prior to that, rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

Despite such an aggressive campaign, inflation remains more than three times higher than levels preferred by the central bank, which has vowed to get to its 2% target.

After four straight jumbo-sized hikes of 75 basis points between June and November, markets expect the Fed to impose a smaller increase of 50 basis points at its upcoming rate decision on December 14.

While Fed Chairman Jerome Powell has indicated that the central bank could shift to smaller rate hikes by December, he has also said rates ultimately may need to go higher in 2023 than policy-makers thought would be needed.

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Central Banks Could See More Volatile Inflation With Supply Chain Shocks - Brainard

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - Central banks could be bogged down in a new era of volatile inflation where they have to use higher-than-usual interest rates to fight successive

shocks to global supply chains from the coronavirus pandemic measures and the Ukraine conflict, Federal Reserve Vice Chair Lael Brainard said.

"The experience with the pandemic and the war highlights the challenges for monetary policy in responding to a protracted series of adverse supply shocks," Brainard said in a speech prepared for delivery at a conference organized by the Switzerland-based Bank for International Settlements.

Brainard said if supply continues to prove slow to respond to demand due to challenges such as demographics, deglobalization and climate change, "it could herald a shift to an environment characterized by more volatile inflation compared with the preceding few decades".

"A protracted series of adverse supply shocks could persistently weigh on potential output or could risk pushing inflation expectations above target in ways that call for monetary policy to tighten for risk-management reasons," she said.

Brainard noted monetary policy often recommended that officials "look through" supply shocks that are expected to be temporary, an approach that the Fed used initially when US inflation rose for what were expected to be one-off "transitory" reasons.

But the sequence of such shocks faced in the last two years, with one handing the baton to the other, blurred the lines about what constitutes a temporary shock as opposed to a persistent shock to potential output, Brainard said.

"Even when each individual supply shock fades over time and behaves like a temporary shock on its own, a drawn-out sequence of adverse supply shocks that has the cumulative effect of constraining potential output for an extended period is likely to call for monetary policy tightening to restore balance between demand and supply," she added.

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, expanded by 7.7% during the year to October, growing at the slowest pace of in nine months after peaking with a 9.1% growth during the 12 months to June.

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US Does Not Foresee Much Oil From Venezuela After Chevron Gets Extraction Permit – Kirby

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) – The United States does not foresee big shipments of oil from Venezuela after the US Treasury Department granted Chevron an extraction permit, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"I will let Chevron speak for this particular issue of sanctions relief, but our expectation is there won't be a lot of oil coming out of there. It will have to be shipped to the United States," Kirby said on Monday. "It remains to be seen how much we'll get drilled down there. It'll be up to Chevron to decide that."

Kirby pointed out that there are currently 9000 unused permits for drilling on US federal lands for companies to take advantage of.

On Saturday, the US Treasury granted Chevron a general license allowing transactions by the California-based energy major that service oil production in Venezuela and its export to the United States.

Transactions performed by Chevron's joint ventures with Venezuelan state oil giant PdVSA are authorized as long as they are related to "production and lifting of petroleum or petroleum products produced by the Chevron JVs."

Sale to, exportation to, or importation into the US of petroleum produced by the Chevron JVs will be allowed as long as it is first sold to Chevron.

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Blinken Reiterates to Kazakhstan Counterpart US Support for Tokayev Reforms - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated to Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi the United States' support for the reforms proposed by recently re-elected President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"[Blinken] reiterated the United States' support for President Tokayev's political and economic reforms and stressed that their full implementation will be important to ensuring a prosperous Kazakhstan and a secure Central Asia," Price said in a statement on Monday.

Earlier this month, Tokayev was re-elected after he won 81.31% of votes in the recent election. Blinken and Tileuberdi discussed on November 26 the elections in Kazakhstan and the government's welcoming of international observers for the event, the statement said.

Blinken also spoke with Tileuberdi about the United States' support for Kazakhstan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the upcoming US-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue, the statement added.

The United States looks forward to the upcoming Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue with Kazakhstan, which will be used to advance shared objectives, according to the statement.

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US Lawmakers Worried Biden's Ease of Sanctions on Venezuelan Oil Sector May Worsen Crisis

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's decision to ease sanctions on Venezuela so as to allow Chevron to extract and import oil from the country will worsen the crisis there, Republican leaders of the US House and Senate foreign affairs committees Michael McCaul and James Risch said in a press release.

"Any change in US policy toward Venezuela must be contingent on a transfer of power from the Maduro regime to a democratically elected government," the release said on Monday. "We are gravely concerned that this unilateral easing of sanctions will only perpetuate the crisis that [Venezuelan President Nicolas] Maduro has created for the Venezuelan people."

Earlier on Monday, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said the United States will not be importing a lot of oil from Venezuela.

On Saturday, the US Treasury provided a new license that allows Chevron to extract oil in Venezuela for six months via its joint venture partners including the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA. However, the license does not expand operations or allow new US investment in Venezuela's oil sector.

The United States granted the license after the Venezuelan government - led by Maduro - and the opposition resumed talks in Mexico City whereby they came to an agreement on addressing the humanitarian crisis in the country and continuing talks focused on the 2024 elections.

A source familiar with the matter told Sputnik that Western partners would need to be allowed to invest in Venezuela for oil production to move up, but such investments will take time given the US sanctions imposed on the country that are still in place.

The United States is looking at Venezuela as an additional source of crude oil, but has no intention of a blanket lifting of sanctions, sources told Sputnik earlier this month.

On Sunday, a senior Biden administration official said that US-imposed sanctions and restrictions still remain in place and the decision to grant a license should not be interpreted as a permissive environment on sanctions. However, the administration will consider whether its policies remain open to further calibrating of the sanctions which depends on Venezuela taking specific steps to address several key issues.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 29 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA ARMS CONTROL TALKS

* The meeting of the Russian-US bilateral consultative commission on the New START treaty in Cairo, scheduled for November 29 to December 6, will not take place, and will be postponed to a later date, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik on Monday.

* Russia notified the United States that it would propose new dates for the bilateral consultative commission on the New START, the US Embassy in Moscow told RIA Novosti.

* The United States wants to see talks on the New START Treaty with Russia take place as soon as possible, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

The United States will be working through its Embassy in Moscow to find out why Russia has postponed the talks on the New START treaty, Kirby said.

* The United States is encouraged by recent calls with Russian counterparts through a deconfliction line and believes continued dialogue is critical, a US Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

CHINA PROTESTS

* The United States does not see any specific effect of the protests in China on supply chains, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

RUSSIA-KAZAKHSTAN RELATIONS

* Russia is one of the largest investors in the economy of Kazakhstan with the total volume of Russian capital investments amounting to almost \$17 billion, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Monday.

* The first foreign visit of Tokayev to Russia after his re-election is of particular importance and the emphasizes nature of the Russian-Kazakh relations, Putin said.

* The fact that Tokayev chose Russia as his first destination after his re-election shows the mutual importance of bilateral relations, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia welcomes Vatican's intention to mediate between Moscow and Kiev, but such platform is not in demand for Ukraine now, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday.

* Media reports alleging that Russia plans to leave the city of Enerhodar and the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP) are not true, Peskov said.

* Peskov declined to comment on a petition filed by mothers of mobilized and conscript soldiers calling for an end to Russia's special operation in Ukraine, saying he had not seen it.

* Almost half of Ukraine's budget deficit next year will be covered by EU funds, Ukrainian Deputy Finance Minister Olga Zykova said.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* The United States is pressuring the EU member states to impose a price cap on Russian oil, Politico reported on Monday.

* Russian gas giant Gazprom has every reason to halt gas supply to Moldova, and the fact that it still has not is a gesture of friendship, former Moldovan President Igor Dodon said.

* European Commission Director-General for Energy Ditte Juul Jorgensen said on Monday that the continent is preparing for energy market instability this winter, but that the bigger challenge could come in future winters.

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Canada's Joly Heads to Europe for G7, OSCE, NATO Meetings – Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) – Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly is traveling to Europe for meetings with her G7, OSCE and NATO counterparts, Global Affairs said on Monday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that she will travel to the Netherlands, Romania and Poland from November 28 to December 2, 2022, to participate in meetings with foreign ministers from NATO, the G7 and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and engage with her counterparts on shared foreign policy and security priorities," Global Affairs said in a press release.

In the Hague, Netherlands, Joly will be co-chairing the High-Level Round Table on Anti-Corruption with her Dutch and Ecuadoran counterparts, the statement said.

Ministers attending the roundtable will be discussing, amongst other things, the creation of an international anti-corruption court, the statement said. Joly will also meet her Dutch counterpart, Wopke Hoekstra, to address "issues of mutual concern," including human rights and security.

From November 29-30, Joly will attend NATO's foreign ministers meeting to discuss the coordination of support for the protection of Ukraine's electric infrastructure.

The NATO meeting, which will also see the attendance of Sweden and Finland as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, is set to address issues related to the Balkans and the Black Sea, the statement added.

Joly will conclude her trip in Poland, where she will attend the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting taking place in the city of Lodz from December 1-2.

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US to Continue Arms Shipments to Taiwan Despite Military Aid to Ukraine – White House
WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) – The United States will continue sending arms to Taiwan and takes its obligation to do so "very seriously," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Monday, in response to reports that the flow of weapons to Ukraine is exacerbating a \$19 billion backlog of weapons bound for the island.

"We take very seriously our responsibility to help provide Taiwan the self-defense capabilities that it needs. That's in accordance with law and policy and that's not going to change," Kirby said during a press briefing. "The [US] President [Joe Biden] just signed out a month or so ago another billion dollars of Taiwan arm sales, and, of course, we're going to continue to look at what the next iteration of that needs to look like and when that would occur."

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Biden, Macron Expected to Discuss EU Concerns Over US Inflation Reduction Act -White House

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron are expected to discuss the European Union's trade concerns regarding the US law known as the Inflation Reduction Act, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"I think certainly the issue will most likely come up," Kirby said during a press briefing when asked whether the Inflation Reduction Act will be discussed during Macron's visit on Thursday. The bill, signed into law by Biden in August, commits \$300 billion toward deficit reduction, in addition to providing approximately \$369 billion in funding for energy security, including tax credits for US-made electric vehicles and subsidies to US consumers, and \$80 billion to increase Internal Revenue Service tax enforcement and operations.

The European Union deems the act "discriminatory" toward goods imported into the United States. Macron called the US legislation unfriendly and non-compliant with the World Trade Organization's provisions.

EU countries are concerned the legislation may divert investments from Europe and could possibly spark a trade war between the United States and its European partners, according to media reports.

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Federal Water Agency Warns California Contractors to Prepare for Fourth Year of Drought

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - US federal water managers on Monday urged California cities and industrial users to prepare for a fourth dry year and the possibility of severe conservation measures.

"The Bureau of Reclamation is asking its contractors receiving Central Valley Project water for municipal and industrial use to begin planning for potentially extremely limited water supply conditions in 2023," the Reclamation Bureau said in a press release.

If drought conditions extend into 2023, the release added, the bureau will find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to meet all the competing needs of the Central Valley Project without implementing more severe water conservation actions.

The bureau said that water storage is currently at historic lows in the reservoirs that it operates in the state of California. The 2023 water year began on October 1st, and the Shasta Reservoir, which is California's largest, is sitting at 31% capacity, according to the agency.

Water storage conditions will continue to be monitored, and the Reclamation Bureau will announce initial water supply allocations in February, the release added.

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US Sees No Impact on Supply Chain From China Protest - White House

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States does not see any specific effect of the protests in China on supply chains, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"We don't see any particular impact right now to the supply chain as a result of these protests," Kirby said during the press briefing.

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US Approves \$323Mln Sale of Short, Medium Range Missiles to Finland - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States approved a potential \$323.3 million sale of short- and medium-range missiles to Finland, the Pentagon said on Monday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Finland of AIM 9X Block II tactical missiles, AGM-154 Joint Stand Off Weapons (JSOW) and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$323.3 million," the Pentagon said in a press release.

Finland, according to the release, requested to purchase 40 AIM 9X Block II tactical short-range missiles, four AIM 9X Block II tactical guidance units, and 48 AGM-154 Joint Stand Off Weapons, which are missiles with a medium-range.

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US Wants New START Talks With Russia to Get Back on Schedule as Soon as Possible - Kirby

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to see talks on the New START Treaty with Russia take place as soon as possible, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Monday, after Moscow postponed the negotiations which were scheduled to take place this week.

"We'd like to see it get back on the schedule as soon as possible because it's important... not just important for our two nations. It's important for the rest of the world," Kirby told a briefing.

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US to Work Through Embassy to Figure Out Why Russia Postponed New START Talks - Kirby

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will be working through its Embassy in Moscow to find out why Russia has postponed the talks on the New START treaty, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"We're going to be working through the embassy to try to figure out what happened here," Kirby said during a briefing.

Earlier, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik the meeting of the Russian-US bilateral consultative commission on the New START treaty in Cairo, scheduled for November 29 to December 6, will not take place, and will be postponed to a later date.

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White House Says No Clear Explanation From Russia Why New START Talks in Cairo Canceled

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has not received any clear explanation as to why Russia canceled the talks on the New START Treaty that were scheduled to take place in Cairo this week, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"We haven't received a real solid answer from the Russians as to why they postpone this," Kirby told a briefing.

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Pentagon on Deconfliction Line: US Encouraged by Recent Calls Between US, Russian Leaders

(Updates headline, lede to clarify quote; adds details, background in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is encouraged by recent calls between US military leaders and their Russian counterparts on matters related to Ukraine and believes continued dialogue is critical, a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday regarding reports about a deconfliction line used between the United States and Russia on matters related to Ukraine.

The spokesperson responded to media reports claiming a deconfliction line between the US and Russian militaries has been used once since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February.

"The US retains several channels to discuss critical security issues with the Russians during a contingency or emergency for the purposes of preventing miscalculation, military incidents, and escalation," the spokesperson said. "We are encouraged by recent senior DoD [Defense Department] calls with Russian counterparts and believe continued dialogue is critical."

The spokesperson's comment does not confirm reports about the US and Russian militaries using the deconfliction line.

However, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley had calls with their Russian counterparts in late October to address Moscow's concerns that Ukraine was preparing to use a "dirty bomb" in the country.

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US Encouraged by Recent Calls With Russians Through Deconfliction Line - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is encouraged by recent calls with Russian counterparts through a deconfliction line and believes continued dialogue is critical, a Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

The spokesperson responded to media reports claiming a deconfliction line between the US and Russian militaries has been used once since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February.

"The US retains several channels to discuss critical security issues with the Russians during a contingency or emergency for the purposes of preventing miscalculation, military incidents, and escalation," the spokesperson said. "We are encouraged by recent senior DoD [Defense Department] calls with Russian counterparts and believe continued dialogue is critical."

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S&P Ratings Says Odds US Economy Will Avoid Recession in 2023 Dimming

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The chances the United States will be able to avoid a recession next year are dimming as rising commodity prices and rate hikes are expected to weaken spending in the country, Standard and Poor's Global Ratings said in a press release on Monday.

"With odds that the US economy will avoid recession over the next 12 months dimmed, we continue to expect the US will fall into recession in 2023," S&P Global Ratings' US Chief Economist Beth Ann Bovino said in the release. "We now expect GDP growth to weaken to -0.1% in 2023. Peak-to-trough US GDP will decline by 0.8%, a mild recession in line with the 1969/1970 recession."

Rising prices and interest rates in the United States are eating away at private-sector purchasing power, the release said.

Although the US economy has been protected by some momentum this year, the biggest concern is what awaits in 2023, such as extremely high prices and aggressive rate hikes, which will weigh down on affordability and aggregate demand, the release said.

Moreover, according to S&P Global Ratings, the conflict in Ukraine, tensions over Taiwan and China's economic slowdown are contributing to the chances that the US economy may tip into a recession.

S&P Global Ratings clarified that this update does not constitute a rating action about the US economy.

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Musk Says Apple Threatening to Remove Twitter From App Store or Request Changes

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - Apple is threatening to remove Twitter from its app store and has requested certain modifications to the social media platform, Twitter CEO Elon Musk confirmed on Monday.

"Yes," Musk said when asked if Apple is threatening Twitter's presence or demanding changes to the social media platform. "Apple has also threatened to withhold Twitter from its App Store, but won't tell us why."

Earlier on Monday, Musk posted a poll asking Twitter users whether Apple should publish all censorship actions it has taken that have affected its customers.

The poll will close on Tuesday afternoon, but so far an overwhelming number of Twitter users support Apple being more transparent about any censorship actions it may have taken.

Last week, Musk said he would create a new smartphone if the social network is removed from the Apple and Google app stores.

Musk created the poll after a firm called LBRY, which handles file-sharing and payments for social networks, posted a statement on Twitter claiming that Apple demanded its apps filter some search terms from being shown or else Twitter's app would not be allowed in the Apple app store.

On October 28, Musk finalized the acquisition of Twitter for \$44 billion. Following the takeover, Musk changed the company's day-to-day operations, including the termination of Twitter's executives who were responsible for the platform's privacy, cybersecurity and censorship, as well as about some two-thirds of Twitter's employees.

The departure of Apple's lead App Store executive Phil Schiller from Twitter sparked speculation that the tech giant was growing concerned about Musk's handling of the social media platform, including reinstating blocked accounts.

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McCarthy Bid for US House Speaker Imperiled by Opposition of 5 Republicans - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy's bid for speaker in the next Congress is imperiled by opposition to his leadership by five fellow Republican congressmen, Fox News reported on Monday.

With Republicans expected to hold a slim 222-seat majority in the House when the new Congress begins work in January, McCarthy can only afford to lose four votes from fellow party members before he is unable to reach the 218 votes needed to become speaker, the report said.

Five Republican congressmen have so far expressed opposition to McCarthy's leadership: Matt Gaetz, Ralph Norman, Andy Biggs, Bob Good and Matt Rosendale, the report said.

Gaetz, Norman and Biggs are considered a "hard no" on McCarthy, while Good and Rosendale have not entirely ruled out the possibility of voting for him, the report said.

Both lawmakers have said that concessions on House rules regarding the speaker's control over committees and how bills move through the lower chamber of Congress could sway their support, the report said.

McCarthy has already agreed to some of the demands, such as altering the composition of the internal Republican panel in charge of making committee assignments, the report added.

Republicans tentatively won a majority in the House of Representatives following the midterm elections earlier this month. Democrats retained their majority in the Senate going into the second half of President Joe Biden's term in office.

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WFP-Chartered Ship Carrying Russian Fertilizers to Set Off in Next 48 Hours - UN

UNITED NATIONS, November 28 (Sputnik) - The long-awaited ship chartered by the World Food Program (WFP) to transport Russian fertilizers to Malawi is expected to set off in the next 48 hours, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"We expect the movement in the next 48 hours," Dujarric told a briefing.

It will be very much welcomed, the official added.

The ship was supposed to start sailing on November 21, but later its departure was delayed.

The vessel will sail via Mozambique, with Malawi as the final destination.

On July 22, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations struck a deal to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for ships with food and fertilizer exports from Ukrainian Black Sea ports. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that most of the ships carrying Ukrainian grain did not make it to the world's poorest countries and ended up in Europe. At the same time, Putin has voiced his concerns that Russian products are not entering the global markets as promised by the agreement.

Since then, the grain deal, originally scheduled to expire on November 19, was renewed for another 120 days. Last week, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin highlighted the importance of lifting Western sanctions on exports of Russian agricultural products to reduce risks to global food security.

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UN Urges Chinese Authorities to Guarantee Right to Demonstrate Peacefully - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, November 28 (Sputnik) - The UN on Monday urged authorities in China to ensure people's right to demonstrate peacefully amid protests against COVID-19 measures. "I don't have any particular comment on COVID policies. But obviously, we have seen some of the videos of demonstrations and our reaction is the same one we have for the world over - we believe in the importance of people's right to peaceful assembly and association, their right to demonstrate peacefully and urge the authorities to guarantee that," UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said at a briefing.

As of November 28, daily COVID-19 cases in China have been hitting record highs for several days in a row. Over the past 24 hours, 40,347 cases were registered in the country, including 3,822 symptomatic and 36,525 asymptomatic cases.

Due to numerous local COVID-19 outbreaks and the deterioration of the epidemiological situation in the country, the Chinese authorities have introduced partial lockdowns in some areas, while also forcing their residents to undergo PCR testing on a daily basis. In particular, restrictive measures have been tightened in a number of China's major cities, including Beijing and Shanghai.

The new restrictions have resulted in the increase in mass protests across the country. Public anger has mounted after a fire occurred in a residential building in Urumqi - the capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region - killing 10 people on November 24. Many people have expressed the opinion that the deaths could have been avoided if the government had not imposed COVID-19 restrictions on the residential complex.

The regional authorities have launched a thorough investigation into the deadly fire and have vowed to bring those suspected of dereliction of duty to justice.

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Senior US Diplomat Will Visit Japan to Discuss Energy, Ukraine's Rebuilding – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) – Assistant Secretary of State Geoffrey Pyatt will travel to Tokyo this week to discuss energy and the recovery of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, among other bilateral issues, the US State Department said on Monday.

"The Department of State's Bureau of Energy Resources Assistant Secretary Geoffrey R. Pyatt will travel to Tokyo, Japan November 30-December 2. While in Tokyo, Assistant Secretary Pyatt will meet with government officials and energy sector leaders to advance bilateral and commercial energy relationships," the State Department said in a press release.

In Tokyo, Pyatt will host an event to engage key stakeholders from the Group of Seven to support the resilience and recovery of Ukraine's energy infrastructure amid Russia's ongoing special military operation, the release added.

The US diplomat will also launch the Japan-US Energy Security Dialogue with representatives of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, according to the release.

Earlier in November, the United States allowed transactions concerning maritime transport of crude oil from Russia's Sakhalin-2 project solely for importation into Japan through September 30 of next year.

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Middle East Quartet in 'Tight Corner' Regarding Palestinian Issue - UN Special Coordinator

UNITED NATIONS, November 28 (Sputnik) - The Middle East Quartet is in a difficult position with respect to the Palestinian issue, United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said on Monday.

"The Quartet is in a difficult tight corner. I would very much like to see it different," Wennesland said during a press conference.

Wennesland explained there is a whole set of issues that are difficult to deal with and warned against any expectation for a quick fix.

The Middle East Quartet comprises the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations. Its mandate is to help mediate Middle East peace negotiations and to support Palestinian economic development and institution-building in preparation for eventual statehood.

Since the beginning of 2022, the Israeli security forces have killed 118 Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, according to the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Palestinians have killed four members of the Israeli security forces and one settlement guard in the West Bank.

Relations between Israel and the Palestinians have been adversarial since the founding of the state in 1948. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their own independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government has refused to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and continues to build settlements in the occupied areas.

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US Defense Chief Austin Calls on Congress to Pass Pentagon Funding Bill - Letters

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Monday urged Congress to pass a full-year appropriations bill to fund the Pentagon and other government operations, with current funding set to expire next month.

"The Department of Defense (DoD) once again faces the threat of an extended continuing resolution to fund our programs and operations into the new year," Austin said in letters to lawmakers. "I strongly urge you to act decisively - now - to meet America's needs and support

our forces who support all of us, by immediately reaching a bipartisan, bicameral agreement on full-year 2023 appropriations for DoD and all agencies."

Austin addressed the letter, obtained by Politico, to Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy and House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro, as well as party leadership in both chambers.

In September, Congress passed a stopgap funding bill to prevent a government shutdown set to begin October 1. The legislation funds the government through December 16, by which point lawmakers will have to pass another appropriations bill or risk a shutdown.

Earlier this month, US Senate Democratic whip Dick Durbin said he is hopeful that lawmakers can pass a bipartisan, omnibus appropriations package. Congress is currently operating in a so-called "lame duck" session, which takes place between elections and the new class of lawmakers taking office.

The continuing resolution currently funding the Defense Department prohibits them from commencing new initiatives, such as those requested by Indo-Pacific theater commanders, Austin said.

The lack of a long-term appropriations bill also delays needed investments in military infrastructure, including barracks and child care centers, Austin said.

The US cannot outcompete China with funding challenges impeding the Pentagon for several months each fiscal year, Austin added.

US national security also depends on funding for other agencies within the State Department, Energy Department, Justice Department and Department of Homeland Security as well, Austin said.

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Israel Use of Force in West Bank Results in 'Bloodiest' Year Since 2005 - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, November 28 (Sputnik) - The use of force by the Israeli authorities in the West Bank during 2022 has resulted in the death of 130 people, marking the year as the "bloodiest" one in nearly two decades, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"According to information received, the use of force by Israel in the West Bank - already 130 people have been killed this year which makes it the bloodiest year since 2005," Polyanskiy said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador said the actions by the Israeli authorities, including building settlements and expropriating Palestinian property - in addition to the use of force - have caused irreversible effects.

Earlier on Monday, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland told the Security Council that the international community has paid less attention to the Palestinian issue due to the Ukraine conflict and other world developments, which has not helped their plight.

Relations between Israel and the Palestinians have been adversarial since the founding of the state in 1948. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their own independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government has refused to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and continues to build settlements in the occupied areas.

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US Voters Back House Republicans Plan to Probe Hunter Biden's Business Deals - Poll

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - Almost two-thirds of US voters support plans by the new Republican majority in the House of Representatives to investigate the overseas business dealings of President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, a Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Monday.

"A new national telephone and online survey by Rasmussen Reports and Miranda Devine's Laptop From Hell finds that 62% of Likely US voters approve of the House GOP's [Republican's] investigation of Hunter Biden's overseas deals, including 42% who Strongly Approve," the pollster said in a statement accompanying the survey.

Some 34% of voters disapproved of the investigations, including 23% who strongly disapproved, Rasmussen Reports said.

After the Republicans won a controlling majority in the House in the November 8 congressional midterm elections, Representatives James Comer and Jim Jordan, the incoming chairmen of the House Judiciary and Oversight committees said that their top priority would be to investigate the business dealings of the Biden family.

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Several Schools in Houston Closed Monday After Power Outage Impacts City's Water Supply (Updates with more details, background in paras 2, 3)

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - Several school districts in Houston, Texas, closed on Monday after a power outage impacted a water plant that supplies about 2.2 million residents, according to city and school officials.

On Sunday, the city of Houston issued a mandatory boil water notice after a power outage affected the city's main water system.

"We are optimistic the [water test] results] will come back clean," Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said during a press conference on Monday. "The TCQ [Texas Commission on Environmental Quality] will notify the city once we can rescind the boil water notice and it is our hope we can get a positive word, at least late tonight or early tomorrow morning because we

would love to see schools resume, businesses continue to function and open up if they have had to close."

The Houston Independent School District announced that due to the notice, all of the district's schools, offices and facilities will be closed on Monday.

Three other schools districts and two colleges also said in separate statements that they will be closed on Monday due to water safety concerns.

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Canada Invests \$C4Mln in Ottawa Airport - Transport Minister

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The government of Canada announced funding of C\$4 million (\$2.98 million) in safety and security of the Ottawa international airport, Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said on Monday.

"I am pleased to announce today that our government is investing close to \$4 million dollars in the Ottawa airport," Alghabra told reporters. "This investment will help ensure continued safe airport operations for passengers, airline crews and airport workers."

The new funding will allow airport authorities to renew pavement in a number of taxi-ways, he added.

The minister reminded that last year the government provided over C\$11 million for maintaining airport's essential air services and the construction of a light-rail transit station.

Ottawa airport is one of the busiest of Canada's airports, which served in 2021 almost 1.2 million of passengers.

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Russia's UN Mission Says US Put Palestinian Issue on Back Burner

UNITED NATIONS, November 28 (Sputnik) - The United States has shelved the Palestinian issue and is holding up any meaningful efforts toward settling the years-long conflict between Israel and Palestine, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"The Palestinian issue has become a bargaining chip in a long series of election campaigns in Israel, while the US has actively pushed it to the back burner of the international agenda," Polyanskiy told a UN Security Council meeting.

The US is blocking any attempts by the Middle Eastern Quartet and the UN Security Council to take substantive decisions on the issue, he added.

Relations between Israel and Palestine have been adversarial since the former's founding in 1948. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity, and builds settlements in the occupied areas despite objections from the United Nations.

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Merriam-Webster Dictionary Names 'Gaslighting' Word of the Year

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The term "gaslighting," invented in 1944 to describe the process of manipulating people into questioning their own sanity is the "term of the Year," the Merriam-Webster Dictionary announced on Monday.

"'Gaslighting' is our 2022 Word of the Year," Merriam-Webster said in a Twitter message.

Use of the term increased more than 17 times by a total of 1,740%, the US dictionary company said.

"Gaslighting" is a colloquialism, loosely defined as manipulating someone so as to make them question their own reality, according to published sources.

The term derives from the title of the 1944 Hollywood film "Gaslight" that starred Ingrid Bergman, Angela Lansbury and Charles Boyer, though the term did not gain popular currency in English until the mid-2010s.

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Buffalo Mass Shooter Pleads Guilty to Murder, Domestic Terrorism Charges - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The gunman who killed ten people in a Buffalo, New York, supermarket has pleaded guilty to 15 charges, including murder and domestic terrorism, ABC News reported on Monday.

Payton Gendron pleaded guilty to 15 charges, including domestic terrorism motivated by hate, murder and attempted murder, the report said.

Gendron still faces more than two dozen federal charges, some of which may result in a death sentence, the report said.

According to the indictment prepared by the Erie County district attorney, Gendron shot and killed ten African Americans at the Tops supermarket because of the perceived race and/or skin color of the victims, the report said.

Gendron was charged in a 25-count indictment with carrying out a domestic act of terrorism motivated by hate, along with ten counts of murder in the first degree, ten counts of murder in the second degree as a hate crime, three counts of attempted murder as a hate crime and one count of criminal possession of a weapon, the report said.

Officials pointed out that Gendron made a number of trips to the store to surveil it and later traveled several hours from his home near Binghamton, New York, to carry out the shooting, the report added.

Gendron is the first defendant to be charged under the New York State's new law on domestic terrorism motivated by hate that was approved in 2020 under then Governor Andrew Cuomo, and the penalty is a mandatory sentence of life in prison.

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EU's Energy Chief Says Future Winters Pose Challenge, Continent Preparing

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - European Commission Director-General for Energy Ditte Juul Jorgensen said on Monday that the continent is preparing for energy market instability this winter, but that the bigger challenge could come in future winters.

"It will be a challenging winter, but I think we have done as much as we can in terms of preparing," Jorgensen said during an interview with The Washington Post. "I think a bigger challenge than these coming months and this winter will actually be the winter of '23/'24, because we see that the global energy markets, and the global gas markets in particular, remain somewhat imbalanced."

There will be challenges in filling energy storages during the next filling season in March and April of 2023, Jorgensen said.

Europe used to supply approximately 40% of its gas from Russia, compared to just 7% this month, Jorgensen said. However, Europe has also seen an increase in supply from other partners, including the United States, Jorgensen said.

Europe remains engaged in negotiations to set a price cap on Russian oil as part of a US-led effort to reduce Russia's revenue from energy sales, Jorgensen also said.

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Several Schools in Houston Closed Monday After Power Outage Impacts City's Water Supply

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - Several school districts in Houston, Texas, closed on Monday after a power outage impacted a water plant that supplies about 2.2 million residents, according to city and school officials.

"A boil water notice has been issued for the City of Houston's Main Water System. Earlier today [Sunday], the water pressure dropped below the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's required minimum of 20 PSI during a power outage at the East Water Purification Plant on Sunday, November 27, at 10:30 a.m.," the city of Houston said in a press release on Sunday. The Houston Independent School District also issued a statement saying that due to the notice, all of the district's schools, offices and facilities will be closed on Monday.

Three other schools districts and two colleges also said in separate statements that they will be closed on Monday due to water safety concerns.

The Houston Mayor's Office said the city administration believes the water is safe but based on regulatory requirements, issuing a boil water notice is required and hopes to suspend it by Monday night or early Tuesday morning.

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Convicted Spy Paul Whelan's Family Say Concerned He Did Not Call Them Last Week

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - The family of convicted spy Paul Whelan, who is serving his sentence in a prison in Russia, issued a statement on Monday expressing concern that he had not called them for more than three days.

"Paul has told us repeatedly over the last 47 months (as of today) that, if he doesn't call home for more than 3 days, to alert the US embassy. So our parents did that, and heard back that the consular staff had also not heard from Paul," the family said in a statement.

US diplomats have said that Paul usually calls them on Thursday but did not do so last week, the statement said.

The Whelan family said that they hope to find out soon about what is happening with Paul.

"We hope that the Kremlin eventually finds a Russian in US custody they care about and return Paul and other Americans home to their families," the statement said.

Earlier on Monday, US Charge d'Affaires in Moscow Elizabeth Rood told RIA Novosti that Washington continues to discuss with Moscow the potential exchange of Whelan as well as US basketball player Brittney Griner.

A Moscow court sentenced Whelan in June 2020 to a 16-year prison term for engaging in espionage.

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Russian Ambassador to Canada Says Summoned Over LGBTQ-Related Tweets

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik that he has been summoned to the Canadian Foreign Ministry in connection with the embassy's LGBTQ-related tweets.

"They have invited me at 15:30 for a meeting with [Assistant Deputy Minister] Sandra McCardell," Stepanov said.

On Saturday, the Canadian government said it will summon Stepanov over "hateful propaganda" and "an attack on the Canadian values of acceptance and tolerance." It came after the embassy reacted to Canadian officials accusing Russia of homophobia by tweeting a picture

of a pride flag with a "banned" symbol over it, alongside the caption: "It is all about family. Family is a man and a woman and children."

The Russian mission later added that "Canada and a range of other state supporters of the neoliberal agenda are deliberately distorting the reality by conflating the concepts of individual sexual preferences and universal human rights."

Last week, the Russian parliament's lower house passed a law banning the promotion of LGBT propaganda, pedophilia and gender reassignment in advertising, media, books, movies and audiovisual services.

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US Ready to Reschedule START Talks With Russia 'at Earliest Possible Date' – State Dept.
(Changes attribution in headline and lede, provides background in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) – The United States stands ready to reschedule talks with Russia on the New START or the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty "at the earliest possible date," a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"The Russian side informed the United States that Russia has unilaterally postponed the meeting and stated that it would propose new dates," the spokesperson said in a statement.

"[The US] is ready to reschedule at the earliest possible date as resuming inspections is a priority for sustaining the treaty as an instrument of stability."

According to the spokesperson, Moscow informed Washington of its decision to postpone the talks in "recent days."

A meeting to discuss the implementation of the New START Treaty was scheduled to take place on November 29 in Cairo, Egypt.

In September, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that the United States and Russia are currently discussing resuming inspections under the New START Treaty and plan to soon hold an in-person bilateral meeting of the consultative commission.

In February 2021, Moscow and Washington extended the only remaining nuclear arms treaty for five more years without any renegotiation of its terms. New START is now set to expire on February 5, 2026.

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RECAST - Crypto Market Hit Again as Lender BlockFi Files for Bankruptcy After Troubled Exchange FTX

NEW YORK, November 28 (Sputnik) - The imploding cryptocurrency market claimed another victim on Monday as BlockFi, a lender with exposure to failed crypto exchange operator FTX, became the second prominent name in the industry to file for bankruptcy within a month.

BlockFi and eight of its affiliates have filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in bankruptcy court in the US state of New Jersey, the company said in a statement.

“As part of its restructuring efforts, the Company will focus on recovering all obligations owed to BlockFi by its counterparties, including FTX and associated corporate entities (“FTX”),” the statement said. “Due to the recent collapse of FTX and its ensuing bankruptcy process, which remains ongoing, the Company expects that recoveries from FTX will be delayed.”

FTX announced on November 11 that it was filing for bankruptcy, sending Bitcoin and other notable digital currencies plunging. FTX was ruined after rival digital currency exchange operator Binance walked away from a proposed acquisition and left it scrambling to raise about \$9.4 billion from investors and rivals, a task it could not achieve.

In Monday’s early trading in New York, Bitcoin was down 2.5%, bringing its cumulative loss for November to 21%. In terms of price, the leading cryptocurrency hovered at \$16,600 after hitting a two-year low of 15,501 earlier this month.

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Life Insurance, Annuity Benefits Payments Reach Record \$200Bln in 2021 – Association

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) – Payments on life insurance and annuity benefits reached nearly \$200 billion in 2021, increasing by ten percent for the second year in a row, the American Council of Life Insurers (ACLI) said on Monday.

“New data from the American Council of Life Insurers (ACLI) shows that life insurance companies paid \$100 billion to beneficiaries of life insurance policies and \$97.7 billion to annuity holders in 2021, both record highs for a single year,” ACLI said in a press release.

In 2021, life insurance payments increased by 10.8% over 2020, while the release said that year saw a 15.4% increase over 2019, the most significant increase since the Influenza pandemic of 1918.

According to the release, 2021 also saw a 6.1% increase over 2020 in the number of purchased life insurance (nearly 46 million), while the total life insurance coverage hit a record \$21.2 trillion.

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Global Media Coalition Urges US to End Prosecution of Wikileaks Founder Assange - Letter

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - A group of five major media outlets from around the world released an open letter on Monday calling upon the US government to end its prosecution of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, who faces up to 175 years in prison for charges brought against him under the Espionage Act of 1917.

The five media outlets – The New York Times, the Guardian, Le Monde, El Pais and Der Spiegel – revealed thousands of confidential US State Department cables in conjunction with Wikileaks in November 2010. The disclosure, known as “Cable gate,” exposed corruption, diplomatic scandals and spy affairs on an international scale, according to the letter.

“For Julian Assange, publisher of Wikileaks, the publication of ‘Cable gate’ and several other related leaks had the most severe consequences,” the letter said. “This indictment sets a dangerous precedent, and threatens to undermine America’s First Amendment and the freedom of the press... Twelve years after the publication of ‘Cable gate’, it is time for the U.S. government to end its prosecution of Julian Assange for publishing secrets.”

Obtaining and disclosing sensitive information when necessary in the public interest is a core part of journalists’ work, and if criminalized, would make discourse and democracy weaker, the letter said.

Assange was apprehended in London in April 2019 on a US arrest warrant, facing extradition and a sentence of up to 175 years in a maximum security prison if convicted. Assange has been held for three and a half years in a high security prison in the UK, typically used for terrorists and members of organized crime groups, the letter said.

In August, Assange appealed the UK’s decision to extradite him, sparking a legal dispute that could delay his extradition for months.

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US Mission to China Says Ambassador Raised Concerns to Beijing About COVID-19 Measures

WASHINGTON, November 28 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns raised concerns to Beijing about their measures to control the spread of COVID-19 amid a rise in infections in the country, US Mission China said on Monday.

"We are actively working with and assisting our citizens experiencing challenges related to the recent rise of COVID-19 infections in China. The People's Republic of China (PRC) authorities have expanded COVID-19 prevention restrictions and control measures as outbreaks occur," the mission said in a statement. "Ambassador Burns and other Mission officials have regularly raised our concerns on many of these issues directly with senior PRC officials and will continue to do so."

Control measures imposed by the Chinese government include residential quarantines, mass testing, closures, transportation disruptions, lockdowns and possible family separation, the statement said.

The US Mission encouraged all US citizens in China to keep a 14-day supply of medications, bottled water and food in their household. The US Mission remains in close contact with US citizens, including through multiple messages updating the community, the statement said. The control measures sparked mass protests throughout China, prompting the government to launch special working groups to monitor the implementation of restrictions, Chinese media reported on Monday.